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The Reliability of Holocaust Survivor Testimony about Theatre in the Terezín Ghetto: A Longitudinal Case Study

by Lisa Peschel

Abstract

Scholars in various areas of Holocaust studies have long debated whether and how to use survivor testimony as evidence regarding past events. The debate becomes even more fraught when we ask whether testimony can serve as evidence of past subjective attitudes and emotional states. In this case study, I examine four narratives by a single survivor of the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto, František Miška, narratives that may help answer the question: Why did prisoners choose to engage in theatrical performances in the ghetto? I will begin by examining Miška's 2006 testimony in the context of contemporary public discourses, and then by comparing his testimonies from 2006, 1997, 1963, and 1948. Ultimately, I will conclude that, in a longitudinal study, the most appropriate method for testing reliability may vary depending on the period being examined. A careful reconstruction of contemporary discourse is indispensable in using testimonies from the 1940s and 1960s as evidence. This study, however, reveals that the reliability of later testimonies is more effectively established by comparing narratives by the same survivor across time.

Introduction

Eyewitness testimony is one of the most complex types of evidence that historians use. Christopher Browning summarised the problems succinctly when he wrote: "How may a historian of the Holocaust use a variety of different, often conflicting and contradictory, in some cases clearly mistaken, memories and testimonies of individual survivors as evidence to construct a history that otherwise for lack of evidence would not exist?"¹ Yet, in his book *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, he employed methods to engage with the memories of both perpetrators and victims. Working with perpetrator testimony, by his own admission, he faced not only the problems of forgetfulness

¹ Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories. Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony*, Madison 2003, 39.

and an unconscious or conscious tendency to reinvent the past, but “a strong motivation intentionally to lie, mislead, minimize, obfuscate, and feign amnesia”.² Yet Browning successfully used this testimony to obtain information that could be derived from no other source, namely the different attitudes within the battalion and how the men were changed over time by what they did. In using victim testimony to establish the chronology of the battalion’s brutal attacks on Jewish communities in the autumn of 1942, he considered “tendencies and recurring patterns” – especially the survivors’ tendency to remember acts of betrayal by their neighbours more vividly than acts committed by the Germans – when interpreting their narratives.³ This led him to very different conclusions than those reached in the book *Neighbours* by fellow historian Jan Gross, whose default position was to trust the testimony.⁴ As Browning concluded: “uncorroborated survivor testimony must always be seen in this light [of possible tendencies] as a possible corrective”.⁵

In another study, *Remembering Survival*, Browning’s history of Jewish slave labour camps in Starachowice, he also relied upon survivor testimony to reconstruct a history for which there were virtually no other sources. In comparing 173 testimonies collected over a span of six decades by survivors who had settled mainly in Israel, Toronto, Boston, and New York, he was surprised to find that, in spite of contradictions in chronology, dates, persons, and events, the testimony revealed “a firm core of shared memory”.⁶ Ultimately, he reached the same conclusions as Henry Greenspan, whose longitudinal studies of testimony revealed extraordinary consistency, finding that “[i]n short, survivor memories proved to be more stable and less malleable than I had anticipated”.⁷ In my own research, I analyse testimonies by Czech Jewish survivors who created theatrical performances in the Terezín Ghetto.⁸ This study, like Browning’s study of Battalion 101, focusses on complex questions regarding attitudes. I want to know not only what the Terezín theatre artists performed, but why they did so and how they felt about it, in order to answer the question: What functions did theatrical performance serve for them? In this article, however, I will address a more fundamental question: What is the most appropriate way to test the reliability of survivor

² Browning, *Collected Memories*, 39.

³ Browning, *Collected Memories*, 43.

⁴ Browning, *Collected Memories*, 42.

⁵ Browning, *Collected Memories*, 43.

⁶ Browning, *Collected Memories*, 46.

⁷ Browning, *Collected Memories*, 47. Greenspan described and analysed his longitudinal studies in Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors. Recounting and Life History*, Westport 1998.

⁸ Since I am working mainly with Czech-language testimony, I will here use the Czech name, Terezín, rather than the German Theresienstadt.

testimony concerning subjective past attitudes and emotional experiences? As I will demonstrate, with this particular group of survivors, all of whom remained in Czechoslovakia after the war, the appropriate methodology may vary depending on the period of testimony being examined. In brief, to interpret pre-1989 testimony, contemporary social and political pressures must be considered to balance out the type of “tendencies and recurring patterns” that Browning mentioned. In post-1989 testimony, however, such pressures appear to have exerted less influence. Instead, a remarkable degree of stability across time becomes the most powerful indicator of reliability. I use the term “reliable testimony” to mean testimony that is acceptable as historical evidence, having been subjected to appropriate critical analysis and rules of evidence, as other sources are. In this article, I will mainly demonstrate the consistency of testimony – the stability across time of post-war narratives about survivors’ subjective experience of the past. Why should this post-war testimony, however, regardless of its consistency, be accepted as reliable evidence regarding their attitudes and feelings in Terezín? If these survivors had written diaries in the ghetto, the connection between wartime attitudes and post-war testimony would be easier to establish. Since, unfortunately, none of them did, I establish the connection in two other ways. First, I compare their post-war testimony with diaries and documents written by prisoners in the ghetto itself.⁹ The attitudes and feelings toward cultural activities in the ghetto that these wartime authors describe closely resemble those expressed by my group of survivors. Second, I compare factual elements of the survivors’ testimony, including statements about what plays they performed and with whom, with sources from the ghetto. These sources, which include preserved records of the prisoner-run Freizeitgestaltung (the office that oversaw cultural activities) and the Heřman collection, a remarkable set of documents on cultural activities in Terezín that includes souvenir posters, programmes, and set designs, confirm the survivors’ memories in the vast majority of cases. Therefore, I argue that their post-war memories of attitudes and feelings can be accepted as reliable evidence as well.

Of course, as Browning himself acknowledged, even questioning the reliability of Holocaust survivor testimony is controversial in some quarters.¹⁰ Moreover, in many areas of scholarship that engage with such testimony, reliability testing is simply unnecessary. Martin

⁹ Such documents include, for example, published diaries, such as Philipp Manes/Ben Barkow/Klaus Leist, *Als ob’s ein Leben wär. Tatsachenbericht Theresienstadt 1942–1944*, Berlin 2005, and Eva Roubíčková/Zaia Alexander, *We’re Alive and Life Goes On. A Theresienstadt Diary*, New York 2015; and reports on cultural activities such as Arno Neumann’s essay published in Lisa Peschel (ed.), *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape. Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto*, Calcutta 2014, 236-239.

¹⁰ Browning, *Collected Memories*, 38.

Kusch, building upon Browning's own classification, identified ten types of research projects that have emerged around testimony.¹¹ Only two – legal discourse and historical-factual discourse – are concerned with the link between the testimony and events of the past. Others, for example, psychoanalytic discourse and life history discourse, have other goals, such as to capture manifestations of trauma in survivors' narratives, or to analyse survivors' struggles to convey their experiences.¹² As Thomas Trezise pointed out, in such discourses "the objective truth or falsehood of what is discovered through storytelling can be relegated to a secondary status or even bracketed altogether".¹³

Some of these discourses, in spite of having different and, for the most part, equally legitimate goals, adopt what Kusch called a "dismissive attitude" towards other discourses.¹⁴ For example, as Aleida Assmann wrote with a nod to well-known arguments by Dori Laub: "The survivors as witnesses do not, as a rule, add to our knowledge of factual history; their testimonies, in fact, have often proved inaccurate. [...] Their point is less to tell us what happened than what it felt like to be in the center of those events [...]".¹⁵ My point is that the terms Assmann treated as oppositional are not mutually exclusive: How the survivors felt is part of factual history. Those feelings help us explain phenomena that are otherwise very difficult to understand – for example, why Terezín prisoners sacrificed scarce resources such as food and sleep to participate in cultural activities.

In my own study, testing evidence for reliability is especially important for two reasons. First, many of the testimonies about cultural activities in the ghetto are so positive that they have generated doubts since the beginning of my research, usually manifested as questions about the survivors' ability to remember their subjective experiences accurately at their advanced age. Second, my study directly counters one of the discourses Kusch described: the "incomprehensibility discourse", as represented perhaps most prominently by Lawrence Langer.¹⁶ As Kusch wrote, such scholars "oppose all attempts to find a positive

¹¹ Martin Kusch, *Analysing Holocaust Survivor Testimony. Certainties, Scepticism, Relativism*, in: Sybille Krämer/Siegfried Weigel (ed.), *Testimony/Bearing Witness. Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture*, London/Lanham, 2017, 137-165, here 144.

¹² Kusch, *Analysing Holocaust Survivor Testimony*, 144.

¹³ Thomas Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing. On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony*, New York 2013, 23.

¹⁴ Kusch, *Analysing Holocaust Survivor Testimony*, 145.

¹⁵ Aleida Assmann, *History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony*, in: *Poetics Today* 27 (2006) 2, 261-273, here 263. The best-known presentation of Laub's arguments is found in Shoshana Felman/Dori Laub, *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York 1991.

¹⁶ See, for example, Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven 1991, or perhaps even more tellingly his chapter on Roberto Benigni's film, entitled *Life is not Beautiful*, in Lawrence L. Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2006, 30-47.

message in the narratives of the survivors. Instead they highlight both the survivors' and our inability to come to intellectual terms with the Holocaust world".¹⁷ My research has revealed not only positive messages in post-war survivor narratives, but a remarkably positive role played by the arts in enabling prisoners to cope with potentially traumatising experiences in Terezín. In order for the prisoners' achievements to be recognised and understood, I wish to remove as many barriers as possible to accepting the survivors' testimony.

Reliability testing played a key role in my analysis of the testimony given by a core group of survivors in the 1940s and 1960s.¹⁸ In selecting this group, I chose survivors who had remained in Czechoslovakia after the war to eliminate variations due to different countries of post-war emigration.¹⁹ To enable a comparison of individual narratives across time, I selected those who were young enough to be interviewed by myself between 2004 and 2008, yet old enough to have participated as adults in cultural activities in the ghetto. Thus, for most of my study, I limited the group to six survivors from one generation: those born between 1910 and 1922.²⁰ In addition to comparing their testimonies across time and with each other, I searched for the type of tendencies that Browning warned of, namely trends that could skew the interpretation of the testimony. By reconstructing contemporary discourse using a small collection of periodicals, I found pressures specific to each decade that influenced how the survivors narrated their past in that particular present moment. For example, as the periodicals revealed, anti-German sentiment in immediate post-war Czechoslovakia was intense. Czech Jewish survivors involved in German-language cultural activities in the ghetto therefore either did not mention it, or linked it with praise of Czech-language culture.²¹ Two decades later, in writings from the early 1960s, survivors prominently conflated antisemitism with racism. Periodicals revealed a key feature of contemporary public discourse: an emphasis on the lack of racism in socialist countries and a

¹⁷ Kusch, *Analysing Holocaust Survivor Testimony*, 144.

¹⁸ Lisa Peschel, *The Prosthetic Life. Theatrical Performance, Survivor Testimony and the Terezín Ghetto, 1941–1963* (PhD Thesis, Minneapolis 2009). Individual chapters of this dissertation have been published as "A Joyful Act of Worship". *Survivor Testimony on Czech Culture in the Terezín Ghetto and Postwar Reintegration in Czechoslovakia, 1945–48*, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26 (2012) 2, 209–228; "Structures of Feeling" as Methodology and the Re-Emergence of Holocaust Survivor Testimony in 1960s Czechoslovakia, in: *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26 (2012) 2, 161–172, and *The Cultural Life of the Terezín Ghetto in 1960s Survivor Testimony. Theatre, Trauma and Resilience*, in: Patrick Duggan/Lisa Peschel (ed.), *Performing (for) Survival. Theatre, Crisis and Extremity*, London 2016, 59–77.

¹⁹ For an innovative study on the effects of postwar environments upon survivor narratives, see: Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing. Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony*, New Haven 2018.

²⁰ In Peschel, "A Joyful Act", I explored an exception to this group: testimonies from the 1940s of three survivors over the age of 60.

²¹ See, for example, Anna Auředníčková's testimony in: Peschel, "A Joyful Act", 215.

critique of the West for racism, motivated by efforts to win the allegiance of the new African states newly emerging from colonialism. However, what was motivating the survivors to engage with this discourse? Jewish testimony on the Second World War had been suppressed during a long period of state-sponsored antisemitism in the 1950s. As censorship began to ease, however, Terezín survivors linked the discourse on racism to Nazi antisemitism in order to introduce their own narratives of the war into the public sphere, including testimonies about their cultural activities in the ghetto.²²

I then proceeded to analyse testimonies provided by the same core group of survivors after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. The preliminary findings of this study, which is focussed on a collection of testimony dating from the mid-1990s and my own interviews conducted between 2004 and 2008, reveal that there no longer seems to be a need to reconstruct contemporary discourse through meticulous analysis of periodicals. More specifically, for a variety of reasons, a search for tendencies in contemporary public discourse after 1989 no longer reveals pressures that significantly influenced the survivors' testimony about cultural activities in the ghetto. It appears that correctives like those I applied to the 1940s and 1960s testimony are no longer necessary. Conversely, an examination of the testimony across time, using the much more detailed interviews from the post-1989 period, yields strong evidence of reliability.

I will here demonstrate these findings with a case study focussed on the testimony of a single survivor: František Miška. His testimony is similar in tone and content to the testimonies of the other members of my core group. Yet Miška is the only survivor for whom I have testimony spanning all four post-war periods. He was also the only one still working professionally at the time of our interview and thus perhaps the one most likely to be influenced by public discourse. In the following section of this article, I will examine Miška's 2006 testimony in the context of contemporary public discourse in an attempt to detect tendencies that might have influenced his testimony. I will then compare his narratives from 2006, 1997, 1963, and the 1940s to see which elements remained stable and which changed over time.

From his testimony and his autobiography, which was published in 2002, it is possible to construct a brief biography.²³ Miška was born in Prague in 1919. He was interested in theatre

²² See: Peschel, *The Prosthetic Life*, 192-203.

²³ František Miška, *Když se pláč směje. Pout' divadelního režiséra* [Can't Cry for Laughing. The Journey of a Theatre Director], Prague 2002.

from an early age and performed with various groups as a teenager. He was deported to the Terezín Ghetto on one of the first transports in December 1941 and was fortunate to secure a job in food service. He performed in several plays in the ghetto before his deportation to Auschwitz in September 1944. There, he was selected for labour and sent to Birkenau. As the end of the war neared, he was deported to Gross-Rosen, then Bolkenheim, and was finally liberated at Buchenwald in April 1945. He was the only person from his family to survive the Holocaust. He returned to Prague and pursued a career as an actor in theatre and film. In the spring of 1964, he was invited to direct a performance at the municipal theatre in Pilsen, and subsequently embarked on a career as a professional director in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Europe. At the time of our interview, he was still working professionally as a director. He passed away in 2017 in Prague.

Miška's 2006 Testimony in the Context of Contemporary Public Discourse

In an attempt to detect tendencies in contemporary discourse that might have influenced Miška's testimony on cultural activities in the ghetto, I examined our 2006 interview using the same methodology I applied to his testimonies from the 1940s and 1960s. I searched his text alongside texts published in selected contemporary periodicals for what Sara Ahmed called "objects of feeling": topics that elicit a particularly strong emotional reaction. Pursuing the argument that emotion is "not what comes from the individual body, but what holds or binds the social body together", Ahmed analysed how emotions represented in texts that circulate in the public domain "create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place."²⁴ We can observe the creation of such boundaries by emotions in periodicals from the 1940s and 1960s, as well as the survivors' reactions to those boundaries in their own texts. For example, in immediate post-war public discourse, as I mentioned above, German-language culture was an extraordinarily negative object of feeling. The Terezín survivors, in order to position themselves within the community of 'patriotic Czechs', did not engage positively with this object in their testimony. In the 1960s, racism appeared prominently in Czech public discourse as a negative object of feeling. Again, the survivors aligned themselves with the collective by condemning racism, and in the process created a space to discuss Terezín's cultural activities by framing their performances as anti-racist. To contextualise Miška's 2006 testimony, I drew upon periodicals from 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the

²⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York 2004, 10.

Second World War, when objects of feeling relating to the ghetto were likely to be circulating in public discourse. For the 1940s and 1960s, I examined *Rudé právo* (Red Justice), the newspaper of the Communist Party, *Hlas osvobozených* (Voice of the Liberated), the newsletter of surviving political prisoners, which was founded in 1945 and renamed *Hlas revoluce* (Voice of the Revolution), after the communist rise to power in 1948, and *Věstník* (Bulletin), the newsletter of the Jewish community. To reconstruct the discourses from 2005, I examined the post-1989 successors to each of those periodicals. I interviewed Miška in June 2006, approximately halfway through the four-year period during which I was collecting testimonies from dozens of survivors, mainly in the Czech Republic but also in the United States, Germany, and Israel. My interviews, most of which were conducted in Czech, were focussed on cultural activities in the ghetto, although we also discussed other topics that the survivors brought up, such as daily life in Terezín, the camps to which they had been deported after Terezín, and their post-war lives. The interviews were intentionally unstructured, to allow the survivor to direct the conversation as much as possible. I often began with questions about the survivor's earlier testimony, or about archival documents from the ghetto, then let them take the lead.

My interview with Miška covered a wide range of topics. Here, I will focus on just a few of the most powerful objects of feeling in his testimony, namely Czech national identity and leftist politics, and their relationship to Czech culture. Our discussion of Czech national identity emerged from a question inspired by his autobiography: his description of a fellow prisoner, a young Czech theatre director named Gustav Schorsch, who is universally acknowledged among the survivors as producing some of the finest work in the ghetto.

“LP: And here you write about Schorsch as a person with truly human, artistic, and national feelings. How was it, I am curious, what do you mean with this ‘national’?
[...]

FM: Today it is pejorative, today it is simply idle talk [...]. I remember, when I was a little boy, I was once with my mother and when they played the anthem my mother cried. That meant something to those people. Today, people do not at all have the feeling that it means something to be Czech, not at all. Only when they play hockey. [...] When Masaryk was president, I still remember well, that meant something. [...] It was a certain kind of heroism, to be a member of that nation, that was something, today it is simply a joke, no one thinks about it. Not at all. Among those politicians [...], what Czech culture means to them, what Czech theatre means to them, what

Czech music means to them [...], for them, those are only things which are good for their career at a certain moment.”²⁵

Czech national identity, as symbolised by Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, clearly remained an object of strong feeling for Miška. His testimony also reveals that, for him, this identity should be performed through an affiliation with “Czech culture [...], Czech theatre [...] Czech music”. In 2006, however, his feelings of pride and sense of “heroism” in belonging to the Czech nation were mixed with a new feeling, namely disappointment in contemporary Czechs and especially in politicians for their failure to share in his high regard for the nation or to demonstrate that regard as he saw fit.

The topic of leftist politics also emerged in a discussion of theatre. I asked whether he thought any new forms of theatre had emerged in the ghetto, or whether the prisoners’ performances continued the influence of the theatre of the First Republic, and especially of theatre artists Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich. As my previous research had revealed, it is impossible to overstate the enduring popularity of Voskovec and Werich – often abbreviated as V+W – among Miška’s generation. Voskovec and Werich, along with their composer, Jaroslav Ježek, created wildly popular comic musical revues at Prague’s Liberated Theatre. After 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany, their shows became even more beloved: V+W were committed antifascists, and their satirical revues manifested Czech solidarity and the will to resist, as Miška described.²⁶ “FM: Well certainly, that was so powerful, that experience of the Liberated Theatre was so powerful, that it would have been impossible not to carry it over [into the ghetto].

[...]

LP: Could you describe to me how it was to be there in the audience, especially at the end of the 1930s?

FM: On the one hand they were leftists, you know, they were strongly to the left, a bit they flirted with that, a bit, a little bit [...] that was a completely different atmosphere. I was also a communist. Who was not? Every decent person was a communist.

LP: And that is something which is very hard to explain today, especially in America, what it meant at that time to be a communist.

²⁵ František Miška, interview with Lisa Peschel, 19 June 2006. All translations are my own.

²⁶ Jarka Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre. Reflector and Conscience of a Nation*, Iowa City, 2000, 51.

FM: Let me suggest how to explain it to them.

LP: Please do.

FM: During a single afternoon, eighteen beggars came to our flat. Eighteen beggars who wanted soup, got bread, got 10 hellers, and left. They were poor. So there was [...] a fight for social justice, and [...] each person, who had a sense of fairness, of equality, it was because of that – later, the face of it, what was happening in the Soviet Union, we did not know at all what was happening there. We had no idea, we thought, now there will come a new world, people are equal with one another and so on. [...] And on top of that they [Voskovec and Werich] made enormous fun of those right wingers. It was intellectually outstanding, the texts were excellent, clever, again it was something new.”²⁷

A leftist political stance remained an object of feeling and was still associated with artistic excellence, but again, the feeling had become more complex. Miška clearly felt the need to explain and defend his own youthful idealism and to express regret that his generation, and the artists they had idolised at the time, had once believed in an ideology that then led to totalitarian domination of much of Europe in the post-war period.

Even before examining the periodicals, it is possible to detect trends in this testimony based on already known influences – most obviously the end of the communist regime. As we have seen, the current political context changed the way he felt and spoke about Czech national identity and about leftist politics: They were still objects of feeling, but the feelings were different. These changes, however, would not necessarily raise questions regarding the reliability of the testimony and would therefore not require the kind of “corrective” that Browning described, because Miška so clearly distinguished between how he felt in the 1940s and how he felt in 2006. For example, rather than claiming he had never believed in communism, he talked of his misguided youthful idealism. His 2006 testimony does not obscure the fact that in the 1940s, performing his affiliation with the left would have been a tremendously positive object of feeling. To detect more subtle influences upon Miška’s testimony, I proceeded to examine the selected periodicals for objects of feeling, looking for intersections with those important to Miška, namely Czech national identity, leftist politics, and Czech culture.

²⁷ František Miška, interview with Lisa Peschel, 19 June 2006.

Právo

Právo (Justice) is a daily newspaper which drew upon the subscriber base of *Rudé právo*. It ceased being affiliated with the Communist Party in 1991, but has maintained a left-wing stance. In 2005, it had the second-highest circulation in the Czech Republic among the major (non-tabloid) dailies, and was the only one not owned by a foreign company.²⁸ I analysed articles in this daily from a single month, namely January 2005, when, due to the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, objects of feeling relating to the ghetto might have been in higher circulation. The main objects of feeling to emerge in this periodical in this month intersected to some extent with Miska's objects of feeling: Czech political culture, the European Union, history and commemoration, and Czech-language culture.

As might be expected from a major daily, Czech national politics emerge as a primary object of feeling, especially regarding the conflicts between the two leading political parties, ODS (Občanská demokratická strana, the Civic Democratic Party, with a liberal-conservative stance) and ČSSD (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, the Czech Social Democratic Party). Early 2005 was a turbulent period. The idealistic leadership of Václav Havel, who had finished his term as president in February 2003, was a thing of the past. He had been succeeded by Václav Klaus, a former economist and the first democratically elected premiere of Czechoslovakia, whose political career had weathered various scandals. Klaus's new year speech, which *Právo* headlined with the quotation "our public discourse has become more vulgar and increasingly superficial", provided a snapshot of the state of affairs.²⁹ In the speech, he characterised the pace of economic change as "solid" but not fast enough to catch up to Western Europe, and lamented the lack of order in state finances, the apathy of voters (none of the elections in 2004 had drawn more than thirty percent of Czech voters), and "the ever greater number of attempts at personal discrediting of political rivals".³⁰ The latter was a reference to members of Klaus's own party, ODS, who were vigorously engaged in discrediting the current premiere and leader of ČSSD, Stanislav Gross, a state of affairs which one *Právo* commentator called "government crisis as farce".³¹ Through the lens of

²⁸ With a circulation of almost 170,000, *Právo* was second only to *Mladá fronta DNES* (Young Front TODAY), an independent, Western-style daily aimed at a general readership with a circulation of 303,400. BBC News, The Press in the Czech Republic, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4068647.stm> (27 July 2020).

²⁹ Václav Klaus, Naše veřejná diskuse zhrubla a je stále více povrchní [Our Public Discourse has Become More Vulgar and Increasingly Superficial], in: *Právo*, 3 January 2005, 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jiří Pehe, Vládní krize jako fraška [Government Crisis as Farce], in: *Právo*, 21 February 2005, 7. Gross stepped down as premiere in April 2005 due to the ongoing scandal.

contemporary Czech politics, Czech national identity appeared to be associated not with heroism and pride, but with frustration and even embarrassment. Czech national identity also manifested itself through another object of feeling: the European Union. Although the Czech Republic had become a member state in May 2004, Klaus himself was an avowed Eurosceptic. In early 2005, the ODS and ČSSD were sparring about whether and how to ratify the EU's proposed European Constitution. In an editorial called "Czech European Constitution Schizophrenia", author Jan Rovenský described Klaus's scepticism and his fears of a loss of Czech autonomy as part of a "European superstate".³² He also referred to a survey from late 2004 that revealed that 86 percent of Czechs were "completely uninterested" in the European Constitution. He did not speculate, however, as to whether the cause was true apathy or, perhaps, weariness of endless political battles. History and commemoration were also objects of feeling in this period, but, with rare exceptions, attention was focussed on one key event: the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Long articles described the participation of dignitaries in a commemoration ceremony held on the grounds of the former camp and the range of prisoners who perished there.³³ Although ten months later, in November 2005, the UN officially designated 27 January as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, focussing specifically on the Jewish genocide, *Právo* articles in January 2005 mentioned both Jewish and non-Jewish victims. The word "Holocaust", however, appeared in several articles, and a front-page article on 28 January acknowledged that in Auschwitz the Nazis, "according to most recent estimates of historians, took the lives of about 1.1 million people, above all Jews from many countries".³⁴ Czech-language culture also emerged as an object of feeling in *Právo*. Articles in the "Culture" pages engaged with new projects, such as Czech films soon to be released and new Czech plays and musicals premiering in the second half of the theatre season.³⁵ They also engaged with cultural icons of the past. For example, an article on 10 January entitled "Contemporaries Remember V+W" described the filming of a programme for Czech television in honour of Voskovec and Werich on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of

³² Jan Rovenský, Česká euroústavní schizofrenie [Czech European Constitution Schizophrenia], in: *Právo*, 28 January 2005, 13.

³³ Osvobození Osvětimi slaví zástupci 50 států [Liberation of Auschwitz Marked by Representatives of Fifty Countries], in: *Právo*, 27 January 2005, 8; Svět: Osvětim se už nesmí opakovat [World: Auschwitz Must Not Be Repeated], in: *Právo*, 28 January 2005, 1, 7.

³⁴ Svět: Osvětim se už nesmí opakovat, 1.

³⁵ Natáčené filmy - na co bychom se měli těšit? [Films Being Made – What Should We Look Forward To?], in: *Právo*, 10 January 2005, 15; Divadlo sází na komedie i původní muzikály [Theatre Relies on Comedies and Original Musicals], in: *Právo*, 17 January 2005, 11.

Werich's birth.³⁶ A few weeks later, another article described more programmes honouring the pair, including a show designed by TV Nova to appeal to youth and "pass humour from generation to generation".³⁷

Národní osvobození

Národní osvobození (National Liberation) is the post-1989 manifestation of the surviving political prisoners' newsletter, which provides the perspective of a group whose pre-war and wartime experiences resembled those of the Terezín survivors in many ways. After 1989 officially labelled the "biweekly paper of the Czech Union of Fighters for Freedom and the Czechoslovak Community of Legionnaires", it assumed the title of the legionnaires' periodical during the interwar period to acknowledge resistance going back to the First World War.³⁸ I examined the biweekly issues of *Národní osvobození* from January through May 2005 for commentary on the anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

In early 2005, the members of the Czech Union of Fighters for Freedom (hereafter the Union) shared few of the objects of feeling expressed in the pages of *Právo*. For example, they did not engage with contemporary political scandals and the acrimonious debates taking place between the major political parties. They also expressed little interest in the EU during this period, perhaps accepting it as a fait accompli, although articles in previous years had expressed an uneasiness that membership would lead to a loss of Czech national identity.³⁹ Czech-language culture, whether theatrical or otherwise, did not figure prominently in its pages. Not even beloved artists from the period of their own youth were featured. The objects of feeling that emerged most prominently in this period were history and commemoration, youth, and the Sudeten Germans.

The Union's focus on history and commemoration was made clear in the first issue of the year, in an address to members by their chair Anděla Dvořáková entitled "Anniversary Year".⁴⁰ Dvořáková emphasised the "legacy of resistance" and her meetings with public figures, which were held with a single goal: to encourage them "not to forget about resistance and especially the resistance fighters, to ensure for them a peaceful and dignified old age".

³⁶ Pamětníci vzpomínají na V+W [Contemporaries Remember V+W], in: *Právo*, 10 January 2005, 15.

³⁷ Wericha připomenou televize i rozhlas [Werich Remembered on Television and Radio], in: *Právo*, 24 January 2005, 16.

³⁸ The Czech Union of Fighters for Freedom (Český svaz bojovníků za svobodu) has existed under various names since 1945. The legionnaires were Czech and Slovak volunteers fighting on the side of the Entente during the First World War to gain support for their independence from Austria-Hungary.

³⁹ See, for example, Neustálé podkopávání české státnosti [Constant Undermining of Czech Statehood], in: *Národní osvobození*, 30 January 2003, 1.

⁴⁰ Anděla Dvořáková, Jubilejní rok [Anniversary Year], in: *Národní osvobození*, 3 January 2005, 1.

She described the anniversary as “an opportunity for us to let the world know about us, in spite of our advanced age”, and exhorted members to pass on their memories to younger generations.⁴¹ Other articles in the same issue looked forward to commemorative events, including a planned meeting with the president on the International Day of Political Prisoners in April and a parade scheduled to take place in Prague in May to commemorate the end of the war.⁴² Articles in the 19 May issue reported enthusiastically on the parade in Prague and commemorative events elsewhere in the country but expressed thinly veiled criticism of the public figures who attended only on ‘round’ anniversaries.⁴³

Although their primary historical focus was on the Second World War, their engagement with other periods revealed their own relationship with Czech national identity. They invoked the name Masaryk frequently as a symbol of the First Republic, the significance of that period being made clear in an article on 13 January.⁴⁴ The article focussed on perceived historiographical attacks on “our awakeners” – key figures in the Czech National Revival in the nineteenth century – which were motivated, according to the author, by the forces of “globalisation and neoliberalism” that were working to “separate the nation from its own history and traditions”. One sentence in particular summed up their feelings about this tradition:

“The ideas and ideals of the National Revival stood at the birth of our First Republic and gave it a democratic spirit, freedom of thought, and self-assured pride, underscored by honourable work and [...] justified cultural and economic ambition.”⁴⁵

Thus, Czech national identity, as symbolised by the First Republic, was still an object of positive feeling for the Union and an ideal worth defending.

Another object of feeling – youth, as the desired heirs to their legacy – appeared in articles describing the efforts to reach them. For example, they wrote about their new website:

“Times change, and if we want to preserve the legacy of our forefathers and pass it on, we must choose paths which are dear to the younger generations”.⁴⁶ A further article informed

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Přípravy začaly [Preparations Have Started], in: Národní osvobození, 3 January 2005, 1; Chybějí národu hrdinové? [Is the Nation Lacking Heroes?], in: Národní osvobození, 3 January 2005, 3.

⁴³ Majové dny 2005 [May Days 2005], in: Národní osvobození, 19 May 2005, 1.

⁴⁴ Bez zakladatelů nejsou pokračovatelé [Without Founders There Are No Continuers], in: Národní osvobození, 13 January 2005, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ <http://www.zasvobodu.cz/>. To je naše další adresa [<http://www.zasvobodu.cz/>. That Is Our Additional Address], in: Národní osvobození, 24 February 2005.

the readers that the editorial board had acquired a computer for the same purpose: “With modernisation, we follow only one goal: to increase the ranks of our readers above all in the young generation, to whom we want to hand over the legacy of resistance.”⁴⁷ There were, however, no reports regarding the success of these particular efforts.⁴⁸

Another intensely emotional object of feeling in the Union’s newsletter was Germany, and more specifically the ongoing demands of the surviving Sudeten Germans. These ethnic Germans had been expelled from the border regions of Czechoslovakia after the Second World War. The *Landsmannschaften*, their organisations which were based mainly in Germany, continued to press for reparations, apologies from the Czech government, and other concessions. Heated articles on this topic appeared almost every month. For example, in January, in an article entitled “Let’s Demand Post-war Reparations from Germany!”, the author suggested pursuing this outstanding debt which, in 2002, was estimated by the Czech foreign minister to amount to 19 million US dollars, in order to counter demands from the expelled Germans.⁴⁹ In April, a further article reviewed the history of Sudeten German support for Hitler and ended with a reminder of Nazi plans to enslave the Slavic peoples after the war – plans that should, the author insisted, be taken into account by members of the *Landsmannschaften* before presenting their grievances.⁵⁰

Terezínská iniciativa

Rather than examining the Jewish community’s post-1989 newsletter, *Roš chodeš*, I decided to analyse the periodical of the Terezín survivors’ own organisation, *Terezínská iniciativa* (Terezín Initiative, hereafter TI), established in 1990. The first issue of the TI’s eponymous periodical was published in the spring of 1991 and described the organisation’s main goal as follows: “to fix the undignified and insulting way that the memory of our victims has been treated”.⁵¹ The issue also revealed that the TI actually began its existence as a subgroup of the

⁴⁷ Vážení čtenáři! [Dear Readers!], in: Národní osvobození, 21 April 2005, 1.

⁴⁸ Jewish members of the Union appeared to have been more successful in integrating commemoration with youth outreach. For information on a project about the fates of the children who had signed an autograph book owned by survivor Helga Weissová-Hošková in Terezín, see: Petr Žák, Kamarádi Helgy, ozvěte se! [Friends of Helga, Get in Touch!], in: Národní osvobození, 3 January 2005, 3, and Památníček paní Helgy Weissové pootevřen... [The Autograph Book of Mrs. Helga Weissová Open ...], in: Národní osvobození, 13 January 2005, 1.

⁴⁹ Jiří Havlíček, Požadujeme od Německa poválečné reparace! [Let’s Demand Postwar Reparations from Germany!], in: Národní osvobození, 13 January 2005, 1.

⁵⁰ Miloslav Šikula, My nic, to všechno Hitler [We Did Nothing, Hitler Did Everything], in: Národní osvobození, 7 April 2005, 3.

⁵¹ Kolik nás ještě je? [How Many of Us Remain?], in: Terezínská iniciativa, Spring 1991, 3. According to this article, the organisers had identified most of their potential members – 1300 survivors – by checking the

Union.⁵² By 2005, the organisation was no longer formally affiliated with the Union, although many survivors were still members of both, and the periodical was issued approximately quarterly. I examined all three 2005 issues, which were published in February, May, and October. The main objects of feeling that emerged were similar to those of the Union – history and commemoration, youth and pedagogy, Czech culture in Terezín, and Germany – but the feelings associated with these objects were often quite different. Instead of fearing irrelevance, the members of the TI reported on their thorough integration into a network of organisations, both Czech and international, actively working towards shared and achievable goals of commemoration and education.

By 2005, many of the organisation's early goals had been achieved, as described in an article by chair Dagmar Lieblová:

“We will probably not forget everything that the TI has achieved during these fifteen years of existence. We made an effort to build and open the ghetto museum [in Terezín], to host further exhibitions in the Magdeburg barracks, to arrange the meeting centre, to publish the Terezín memorial books, and to help the former prisoners get humanitarian aid. [...] Much has changed in our activities, historical research and publications have been taken over by the Terezín Initiative Institute, and our main efforts in the current period are social and health support for our members and to exert an influence on the younger generation.”⁵³

As Lieblová also noted in her report, the TI had established a separate institution for historical research in 1993. By 2005, the Terezín Initiative Institute was, for example, organising and participating in conferences all over the world and publishing a successful academic yearbook in Czech and German. Terezín survivors themselves were engaged in commemoration and, in this sixtieth anniversary year, they were very much in demand. A report in the February issue described a 27 January event in the senate of the Czech Republic for “the day of victims of the Holocaust” featuring speeches by politicians in the presence of “former prisoners from Auschwitz and Terezín”.⁵⁴ Terezín survivors had also been invited, along with members of the Union, to meet with President Václav Klaus in Prague Castle in

membership card file of the Union. Only five percent of the former ghetto prisoners they eventually located were identified through other means.

⁵² Hanuš Schimmerling, *Památka obětí musí zůstat živá* [The Memory of the Victims Must Remain Alive], in: *Terezínská iniciativa*, Spring 1991, 1.

⁵³ Dagmar Lieblová, *Zpráva o práci předsednictva Terezínské iniciativy v roce 2004* [News about the Work of the Board of the Terezín Initiative in 2004], in: *Terezínská iniciativa*, May 2005, 3.

⁵⁴ Doris Grozdanovičová, *Ze senátu* [From the Senate], in: *Terezínská iniciativa*, February 2005, 10.

April.⁵⁵ Further articles described several lesser-known but still deeply felt anniversaries that were marked over the course of the year.

Their focus on the younger generation as an object of feeling was revealed in articles about their work with students, as survivors were just as much in demand for educational purposes. The TI organised and funded a number of pedagogical activities, including trips for Czech schools to the Terezín Memorial.⁵⁶ The TI also reported on survivors' participation in events organised by others. The May issue described a wide variety of such events taking place in several different countries, ranging from discussions in schools to Terezín-related performances, exhibitions, book launches, and productions of documentary films.⁵⁷ In an article about an event in Leipzig, the writer provided a succinct description of both the content and the positive reaction of the young audience:

“We spoke not only about the hardship we experienced, but also the strength of culture and friendship in Terezín. Most of the listeners were young people – middle school students, who displayed a deep interest in these past events.”⁵⁸

Czech-language cultural activities related to Terezín itself were also powerful objects of feeling. The May issue described a CD recorded in Israel of songs by Terezín cabaret artist Karel Švenk, performed by survivors, and an October article reported on a concert in Rostock, Germany, of works by Terezín composer Karel Reiner.⁵⁹ The most vivid emotion, however, was expressed regarding the Czech children's opera *Brundibár*, which had been performed in the ghetto 55 times.⁶⁰ An article in the February issue described the first post-1989 performances of *Brundibár*, initiated by survivor Jiří Vrba, who had seen the performance in the ghetto as a young child.⁶¹ He managed to interest Prague's Dismán Radio Children's Choir in the project. The successful and emotional premiere, held in Terezín itself with many survivors present, led to the recording of a CD by the Dismán Choir and

⁵⁵ L.A., Pozvání na Pražský hrad [Invitation to Prague Castle], in: Terezínská iniciativa, May 2005, 16.

⁵⁶ After a protracted battle, the Czech Ministry of Education was persuaded to support these trips financially. See: Michaela Vidláková, Nová naděje pro školní zájezdy do Terezína [New Hope for School Trips to Terezín], in: Terezínská iniciativa, October 2005, 5.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Michaela Vidláková/Artur Radvanský, Přehled mezinárodní aktivity v 1. pololetí 2005 [Overview of International Activity in the First Half of 2005], in: Terezínská iniciativa, October 2005, 8.

⁵⁸ Anna Hanusová, Vzdělávací programy o holocaustu v Lipsku a Salcburku [Educational Programme in Leipzig and Salzburg], in: Terezínská iniciativa, October 2005, 4.

⁵⁹ Eva Herrmannová, Zajímavé cédéčko Karla Švenka [Interesting CD of Karel Švenk], in: Terezínská iniciativa, May 2005, 11; Lisa Miková, Karel Reiner in memoriam 1910–1979, in: Terezínská iniciativa, October 2005, 4.

⁶⁰ Joza Karas, Music in Terezín 1941–1945, New York 1985, 98.

⁶¹ Zdena/Václav Fleglovi, Brundibár a Dismánův soubor [Brundibár and the Dismán Choir], in: Terezínská iniciativa, February 2005, 15–16.

performances in Berlin, Antwerp, and the USA. The October issue reported on still more performances of *Brundibár* by other choirs around the world, including in Germany, France, and Canada.⁶²

Although, as Holocaust survivors, the members of the TI might be expected to share the Union's anxiety regarding Germany and the *Landsmannschaften*, the pages of their periodical reveal no such fears. Instead, the authors wrote enthusiastically of productive collaborations with German individuals and organisations. Thus, rather than viewing Germany as a negative object of feeling, the survivors integrated Germany into a thoroughly positive object of feeling: their international educational and commemorative projects.

All in all, the TI's periodical provides a surprisingly cheerful picture of the circumstances of its members in 2005. In spite of their advanced age, many of them were actively engaged in activities that they perceived as profoundly meaningful.

Miška's Testimony in the Context of the Periodicals

Returning to Miška's testimony, I investigated how the tendencies in the various public discourses that I identified in these three periodicals may have influenced his narrative. Certain objects of feeling were clearly mutual. For example, Czech national identity appears to have held a similar meaning, and a similar emotional valence, for Miška as it did for the readers of *Národní osvobození*. With *Právo* he shared the desire to acknowledge the contributions of Voskovec and Werich to Czech culture, although *Právo* noticeably failed to mention their leftist political leanings. The fact that Miška agreed to give his testimony and did so on several occasions in the past indicates a desire to commemorate this period that was shared by the readers of *Národní osvobození* and *Terežinská iniciativa*. Other objects, however, that emerged as vitally important in the periodicals do not appear in his testimony: the EU, Sudeten Germans, and the desire to convey a legacy to youth. Whether they were simply unimportant to him, or whether he did not discuss them because I did not ask about them, is a question that cannot now be answered, but I find it unlikely that these particular topics would have influenced his testimony about cultural activities in the ghetto. Even after a detailed examination of the objects of feeling circulating in the discourse of these various

⁶² Petr Liebl, *Brundibár nejen v Evropě, ale i za "velkou louží"* [Brundibár Not Only in Europe, But Also across the "Big Pond"], in: *Terežinská iniciativa*, October 2008, 6-7; Michaela Vidláková, *Brundibár ve Francii* [Brundibár in France], in: *Terežinská iniciativa*, October 2008, 7; Eva Herrmannová, *Brundibár v Lipském Gewandhausu* [Brundibár in the Leipzig Gewandhaus], in: *Terežinská iniciativa*, October 2008, 8.

periodicals in 2005, I could thus detect no tendencies that would require the type of “corrective” that Browning described.

Why, when public discourses in the 1940s and 1960s were so influential upon testimony, was there such a lack of influence after 1989? Clearly, the government had less coercive power after 1989 than it did, for example, in the 1940s, when failure to align oneself with the community of ‘patriotic Czechs’ could result in deportation, so the survivors’ need to position themselves within the boundaries created by key discourses was much less urgent after 1989.⁶³ Most of the survivors, Miška excepted, were also retired by this point, so there was little reason to be concerned about public standing or employment. In addition, these post-1989 testimonies were collected with the understanding that they would not circulate in the public sphere, so there was simply little risk attached to expressing different objects of feeling, or different feelings about the same objects. In sum, there are several possible reasons for the lack of influence, but my conclusion remains the same: These public discourses did not generate the kinds of ‘tendencies’ in Miška’s testimony that Browning described as requiring a corrective.

Miška’s Testimony across Four Decades

A further methodological approach that potentially demonstrates reliability, rather than simply a lack of unreliability, is the examination of the consistency of testimony across time. In this section, I will track Miška’s testimony backwards chronologically regarding two additional objects of feeling: Gustav Schorsch, as the inspiration for some of his most emotional testimony, and German-language culture in the ghetto, as the object of feeling perhaps most likely to be unstable due to the influence of contemporary public discourses. In brief, what I have found is extraordinary stability in his engagement with these objects.

In my 2006 interview with Miška, I did not ask him about German-language culture in the ghetto, so unfortunately I can provide no information about this possible object of feeling. I did, however, ask additional questions about Schorsch. Miška spoke about him at length, describing his refusal to engage in Terezín’s theatrical activities at first and his absolute commitment to the work later on:

⁶³ See Peschel, “A Joyful Act”, 210.

“But that Schorsch, his way of planning, that was his artistic credo, he did not know how to do things any other way. He was not a person who was capable of doing anything for the moment. He did not want to do anything [theatrical when he arrived in Terezín], because he had the impression, that he would not be able to do what he wanted. And I talked him into it [...]. He was also the only professional, we were complete laypeople, right. And when he did something, he did it absolutely, which is the only way to do it [...]. I learned that from him.”⁶⁴

He also spoke of Schorsch’s extraordinary sense of moral responsibility and described him as “a person who felt responsible, to an almost unnatural degree, for what he did, for each step he took”. When I asked him about the seminars Schorsch organised for his actors, he replied,

“You know, we were all amateurs. And he was the only professional, and had contact with people who were at the peak of Czech theatrical culture. [...] And we stared at him like crazy people, for us it was simply something amazing, what he lectured. We were idiots, who did not know anything about theatre, and suddenly along came a person who showed us how it was done.”⁶⁵

These themes – Schorsch’s arrival, his commitment, the seminars, and his sense of responsibility – arose in his October 1997 testimony as well, collected as part of an initiative by the Jewish Museum in Prague.⁶⁶ All the interviews in this collection were conducted by Terezín survivors Anna Lorencová and Anna Hyndráková, who had been young teens during their internment in the ghetto, and the interviews are dotted with references to memories they shared with fellow survivors. Lorencová and Hyndráková structured their interviews with a list of questions that were organised chronologically, but both were quite flexible in allowing the interviewee to move among periods and topics as their narratives unfolded.

When Lorencová asked Miška specifically about theatre in Terezín, his first reference was to Schorsch as “one of the greatest losses to Czech culture”. Although he did not describe the seminars specifically, he spoke of Schorsch as an educator:

⁶⁴ František Miška, interview with Lisa Peschel, 19 June 2006.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ For a report on this collection, see Anna Lorencová/Anna Hyndráková, *Česká společnost a židé podle vzpomínek pamětníků* [Czech Society and Jews in the Memory of Survivors], in: Miroslav Kárný/Eva Lorencová (ed.), *Terezínské studie a dokumenty 1999* [Terezín Studies And Documents 1999], Prague 1999, 97-118.

“AL: Were you active in all those things that Schorsch did?

FM: Yes, in all.

AL: You took part as an actor.

FM: Yes. I didn't have any idea about directing, I didn't even know how one plays theatre. He taught us everything, Schorsch initiated us into it.”⁶⁷

After discussing some of Miška's pre-war theatrical activities, they returned to the topic of Schorsch. Miška described him in terms very similar to those he used in his 2006 testimony, focussing on his sense of responsibility and his hesitation to engage with cultural activities in Terezín when he first arrived:

“[H]e was the first person I ever met who took things upon himself. Who felt absolutely responsible for every word he said and every deed he did. Literally. That was a revelation. And also in art. [...] He originally didn't want to do anything, because he thought that the connection with some kind of ideal that he had in his head was unrealisable. There, he found a band of cursed amateurs who didn't know anything. So he thought it wouldn't work. Then we somehow pulled him into it.”⁶⁸

In 1997, in addition to discussing Schorsch, he brought up the other object of feeling I will examine: German-language theatre in the ghetto. He described his own involvement briefly in the following excerpt (the unbracketed ellipsis in the transcript indicates German-language names that the transcriptionist apparently did not recognise):

“Then the Germans [German Jewish theatre artists] wanted to do something with me as an actor, because there weren't many people, there was Kurt ... and another well-known German director, I don't remember now what his name was. [...] We started to do ... and I didn't finish it.”⁶⁹

The information is somewhat vague due to Miška's own faulty memory and the transcriptionist's omission both of Kurt's surname and the name of the play. He revealed, however, no sense of a need to conceal or downplay his involvement in a German-language performance. His claim that he did not finish the play is most likely a simple statement of

⁶⁷ František Miška, interview with Anna Lorencová, 17 October 1997, 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 8. Kurt is likely Kurt Gerron, a well-known German Jewish actor and director who was a prisoner in the ghetto.

fact: There is no archival record of this German-language performance, even though, for almost all of the other plays he mentions, there is a corresponding poster in the Heřman collection. This lack of documentation reinforces his claim that the show never got beyond the rehearsal stage.

Miška's 1963 testimony was collected by Eva Šormová, a 19-year old student of theatre history at Charles University in Prague, who later became one of the leading scholars at Prague's Theatre Institute and an early supporter of my research. In 1963, when her tutor Jan Kopecký, who had worked with Gustav Schorsch before the war, suggested she write her seminar paper on the topic of theatre in the Terezín Ghetto, she interviewed 23 survivors. As Šormová described her methodology to me in 2004, she had asked survivors a few basic questions regarding fellow theatre artists or specific performances and then simply "let them speak".⁷⁰ Upon my request in 2007, she typed up her handwritten notes from ten of these interviews. These extremely mediated texts hint at, rather than perfectly capture, the survivors' own feelings and turns of phrase, but provide an astonishing wealth of information on the theatrical life of the ghetto from various individual points of view.

Šormová interviewed Miška twice, on 18 and 23 April 1963. Her notes of their conversations consist mainly of an extensive list of play titles and notes on their performance, and almost all are confirmed by archival documents from the ghetto. Fortunately, Šormová recognised the name of the German-language play the transcriptionist missed in 1997, and Miška remembered the name of the director: "Woyzeck – rehearsals took place, but it was prepared in German, K. Meinhard directed it."⁷¹ Although this reference is too telegraphic to discern any attitude towards the performance, it is indistinguishable in tone and length from Šormová's notes on the thirteen Czech-language plays he mentioned in the first interview.

Even in this fragmentary form of evidence, Schorsch holds a prominent place. Miška mentioned him from the beginning, as the second note of the first interview reads: "Schorsch was a philosophical idealist with a sense for social themes".⁷² It was not until the second

⁷⁰ Eva Šormová, interview with Lisa Peschel, December 3, 2004.

⁷¹ František Miška, interview with Eva Šormová, 18 April 1963. The play *Woyzeck*, by German dramatist Georg Büchner, was written in 1837. Theatre and film director Carl Meinhard, who was educated in Prague but spent most of his career in Berlin, was deported to Terezín in October 1942.

⁷² Ibid.

interview, however, that Miška talked about Schorsch at greater length, describing his artistic perfectionism:

“Schorsch was very anxious to ensure that the performance was of high artistic quality and that, from the social point of view, it had some meaning. There were many plays which were considered, but the selection was very strict.”⁷³

He also described the seminars and the feeling of responsibility behind them in more detail:

“Schorsch, before he began to do theatre, organised seminars, with which he wanted to bring all participants – future interpreters – to the same common spiritual basis, to reach a point where there was an affiliation among them in their approach to the work, to the text. Maximal feeling of responsibility. If someone leads such a seminar, it has enormous meaning, he will achieve much more, than if he quickly did one performance after another.”⁷⁴

In his 1960s testimony, however, Miška did one surprising thing that appears in only this period: He spoke critically of Schorsch.

“Schorsch, when he rehearses, he plays it out [for the actors]. His playing out, related to his recitation [of poetry], it was usually somewhat in conflict with what he demanded from the actors. A character should have rhythm [...] but in his recitation, playing was somewhat forced.”⁷⁵

Elsewhere in these 1963 interviews, he was even more critical of some of his fellow actors in the ghetto.⁷⁶ I have argued that testimony is, for the most part, extraordinarily consistent across time, unless there is some specific pressure upon it. In this case, the pressure was likely internal, generated by an impending life change: In 1964, Miška made a

⁷³ František Miška, interview with Eva Šormová, 23 April 1963.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Peschel, *The Cultural Life*, 72.

professional transition from acting to directing.⁷⁷ Perhaps, at this point in his career, he felt entitled to criticise not only his fellow actors, but his mentor, too.

Miška's 1940s testimony appeared in a memorial volume dedicated to Gustav Schorsch.⁷⁸ The volume was edited by Jan Kopecký (later Eva Šormová's tutor) and published in Prague in 1948. The volume included Schorsch's own letters and writings, testimonials by his pre-war theatrical associates, and essays by several Terezín survivors.

In this period, given the intense pressure on survivors to display their affiliation to Czech national identity and Czech-language culture, it is not surprising that Miška did not mention his own involvement in German-language performance. He did, apparently, feel the need to establish Schorsch's own national credentials for the reader, perhaps because of his German name. He described an incident that does not appear in any of his later testimony:

“He [Schorsch] behaved in all situations simply uncompromisingly, strictly according to his conscience. In the camp at Fürstengrube [where he was deported after Terezín and Auschwitz], some SS men wanted him to recite to them in German. He told them that he didn't know how. Maybe it would have saved his life.”⁷⁹

Miška's phrasing, “he told them that he didn't know how” (*Řekl jim, že neumí*), is somewhat ambiguous. It could mean that Schorsch genuinely did not know German, or that he lied to the SS officers, telling them either that he did not know German or that he did not know how to recite. Evidence regarding whether Schorsch actually did speak German is contradictory, but the point Miška was making is clear: Schorsch refused to perform for the SS officers in their language, perhaps at the cost of his life.

Miška devoted most of his essay to describing Schorsch's exemplary personality and theatrical practice, touching on themes and topics that recurred consistently in his later testimony. For example, he explained why Schorsch initially did not want to engage with the theatrical life already underway in Terezín:

⁷⁷ Miška, *Když se pláč směje*, 82.

⁷⁸ František Miška, untitled essay, in: Jan Kopecký (ed.), *Nevyúčtován zůstává život. Sborník prací Gustava Schorsche a vzpomínek jeho přátel* [A Life Remains Unreckoned. A Collection of Works by Gustav Schorsch and the Memories of his Friends], Prague 1948, 135-138.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 136. Miška himself was not deported to Fürstengrube and did not explain how he knew of this incident.

“When he [Schorsch] arrived, we were performing a play by Zdeněk Jelínek, *Comedy about a Trap*. It is, in a word, a play about how the SS and big capital will finally get it on the head. [...] But Gustav didn’t like that kind of theatre. [...] He didn’t want theatre to influence people politically unless it would also make them morally conscious [...]. He carried over his sense of personal responsibility from outside the stage into the theatre.”⁸⁰

Later in the essay, he described how Schorsch finally did become involved:

“Probably a month after his arrival in Terezín, he began to do theatre with us. To get to know people and to initiate them a bit into his method of working and his point of view, he started a theatre seminar. It was in the period when transport after transport was leaving for Auschwitz. He simply ignored all of the exterior circumstances. He worked as if he lived in deep peace, and he planned the seminars to last for two to three years. This was typical of his attitude toward things. [...] He never improvised. [...] He tried all possibilities and the diligence which he devoted to everything was exemplary.”⁸¹

What becomes apparent in this examination of testimony across several decades is the consistency of Miška’s accounts. Regarding Schorsch as an object of feeling, the same themes that emerged in my interview with him in 2006 can be traced all the way back to his first testimony in the 1940s: Schorsch’s refusal at first to engage with theatre in the ghetto and then, subsequently, his total commitment to his art, his sense of responsibility, and his lectures and seminars. The emotions associated with Schorsch also remain the same: admiration, devotion, and deep appreciation of the work they did together in the ghetto. Even with the object of feeling perhaps most likely to change over time, German-language culture, his descriptions of the rehearsals for *Woyzeck* were consistent in 1963 and 1997, once the intense anti-German pressure of the 1940s had eased and he could broach the topic.

Conclusion

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

After a thorough examination of Miška's testimony across four decades, my findings are the same as Browning's and Greenspan's: Although Miška is sometimes inconsistent with dates and forgetful about names, the key features of his testimony remain stable from the 1940s through 2006. A preliminary analysis indicates that this is also true of the testimony of the other five survivors in my core group. Their narratives are also consistent with those of dozens more survivors I have interviewed in the Czech Republic, Germany, Israel, and the United States since this project began, and of the many others whose testimony I have only been able to read. Conversely, my examination of Miška's 2006 testimony in the context of periodicals from 2005 reveals no trends caused by the influence of contemporary discourse that would require any kind of corrective. Therefore, the way forward in my further analysis of the post-1989 testimony is clear: Rather than continuing my in-depth analysis of periodicals to create an even more detailed reconstruction of public discourses from the mid-1990s and from 2004 to 2008, I will examine the consistency of the testimonies across time and across my core group of survivors. Considering the correspondence between descriptions of feelings written in the ghetto versus those described after the war, and the accuracy of testimony on cultural activities as verified by archival documents from the ghetto, I will accept the consistency of the post-war testimonies across time as sufficient evidence to confirm their reliability.

Yet the question arises: Why go through the labour-intensive and time-consuming process of analysing the 2005 periodicals if my conclusion, ultimately, is that such an analysis does not reveal anything significant? Since I am working within what Kutsch called "historical-factual discourse", I see no reason to exempt testimony from methodological processes that could raise doubts about its accuracy before demonstrating, as I have done in this article, that that process is unnecessary. Many works about survivor testimony that I respect greatly have been written by scholars working within other discourses, focusing on something other than historical truth. I believe, however, that we do the survivors a great injustice if we take the default position that historical truth, as a rule, cannot be found in their testimonies. The "firm core of shared memory" in the Terezín survivors' narratives has something quite remarkable to tell us, not just about how they narrated their experiences, or about how they came to terms with them after the war, but about the role that cultural activities in the ghetto played in their survival.